

A Play on Worlds: Aristophanes'

Thesmophoriazousai

Nick Lowe

Aside from its title, the *Thesmophoriazousai* is an easy play to enjoy. It has the fewest obscure political jokes of all Aristophanes' preserved comedies, and an unusually swift and connected plotline. There are no major slack moments in performance; the play is built from a series of seven or so dovetailed sketches, each building carefully up to a climax of pace and absurdity before jumping to the next with dramatic momentum intact. The play's main comic devices – cross-dressing, parodies, preposterous impersonations are still familiar, and we still enjoy the mischievous confusion of boundaries between high and low art, men's lives and women's, real life and fiction. The Penguin translation, as *The Poet and the Woman*, is especially good. As an introduction to a dramatist of phenomenal skill and complexity, we could hardly wish for a better showcase.

The *Thesmophoriazousai* develops a surprising link between two of Aristophanes' most lasting obsessions: the tragic *avant-garde* (especially Euripides), and the secret world of Athenian housewives. Both themes are dealt with at length in three of our eleven extant plays, but their fusion here is unique and, at first sight, bewildering. On the surface the link, from which the main plot springs, lies in the received wisdom of the time that Euripidean tragedies were slanderous of womankind. (Modern readers find this a puzzling verdict, but it seems to have been formed by a notorious series of now-lost early kitchen-sinkers on illicit lust and unwed mums, of which the surviving *Hippolytus* and *Ion* are late and imperfect representatives.)

But in fact the play's chief richness lies in the deeper interweaving of these two strands. Like the sexes in Athenian society, the two forms of Athenian drama were highly segregated. No playwright, however gifted, attempted both tragedy and comedy; even within the same festival, tragic and comic productions had separate contests, separately financed and produced. Aristophanes uses the setting of a sexually-segregated religious festival to play sophisticated games with traditionally separate worlds – not just women's lives and men's, but the theatrical worlds of tragedy and comedy, and even the barriers between art and life itself.

Plot and players

Thesmophoriazousai means *Women Celebrating the Thesmophoria*. It is a mischievous title, promising an expose of the most august of the secret women-only festivals that dotted the

Athenian religious calendar. For three days each autumn a mass of townswomen would camp in the sanctuary of Demeter Thesmophoros, and no man was ever supposed to know what went on. In the event, Aristophanes' play elegantly avoids profaning any holy secrets by turning the whole mystery into a deft comic sleight. What the women get up to at their festival, it is "revealed", is just what the men get up to in the real world outside: they hold political meetings to debate action on issues of the day, such as (to take a women's issue of burning concern) how to avenge the tragic slanders of Euripides.

But this central joke of sex roles upended sprouts some ingenious offshoots. As a man, Euripides cannot attend the Thesmophoria to plead for his life directly. At first he plans to insinuate the mincing Agathon, a new-wave tragedian of doubtful masculinity, into the women's debate to plead on his behalf. But Agathon refuses, and Euripides must fall back on his only remaining ally, who now emerges as the play's hero: a sublimely, uncouth in-law, who is packed off to the Thesmophoria, rudely depilated and frocked, to save his kinsman's bacon. (Our manuscripts name him Mnesilochus, after the real Euripides' father-in-law, but in the play itself he is nameless. The pedantic ancient editor who introduced the name has missed the point: the In-Law is a preposterous fiction, a carefully unidentified black sheep in the artist's clan.) At the festival, he infiltrates the debate but is caught and unmasked; for the notorious homosexual Cleisthenes (accepted by the women as an honorary member of their sex) brings word of Euripides' counterplot.

From now on, the problem is to rescue the In-Law as much as to save Euripides' skin. The second half of the play is a sequence of bizarre rescue attempts, imperfectly masked from the captors' understanding by virtuoso parodies of Euripides' recent experimental damsel-in-distress swashbucklers. In a two-handed burlesque of Euripides' surviving play *Helen*, the legendary beauty Helen is played by our priapic middle-aged transvestite the In-law, her romantic rescuer by the geriatric tragedian himself. But all attempts founder, and in the final seconds Euripides is forced to come to terms with the women to secure his colleague's release.

Travesties

Thus the *Thesmo* is a play of sustained and interlocking parodies, whose humour and complexity arise from the simultaneous confusion of different traditionally-segregated worlds. In the Agathon prologue, life parodies art: the playwright (like Euripides himself in Aristophanes' youthful *Acharnians*) lives in a stage set, speaks in tragic dialogue, dresses and preens like his characters. But already the parody has gender-bending overtones, which lead to a confrontation between tragedy and comedy itself. The new wave in tragedy was notoriously fond of female leads, lacy fluttering lyrics, and fervent emotional displays; and Agathon, the most dazzling of these new romantics, was in real life the handsome younger partner in a monogamous homosexual couple. By contrast, the traditional heroes of comedy

are thoroughly virile – not just in their phallic costume, but in their whole personality and outlook on the plot. The encounter between Agathon and the comic hero "Mnesilochus" thus makes jokes not just between life and art, but between the sexual worlds of the different forms of drama:

AGATHON: *I wear my clothes to suit my inspiration. A dramatic writer has to merge his whole personality into what he is describing. If he is describing a woman's actions, he has to participate in her experience, body and soul.*

MNESILOCHUS: *What an exhausting time you must have when you are writing about Phaedra!*

AGATHON: *If he's writing about a man, he's got all the bits and pieces already, as it were; but what nature hasn't provided, art can imitate.*

MNESILOCHUS: *Let me know if you are writing a satyr play, and I'll come and help with the rude bits.*

Already in this prologue individual characters have begun to drift between worlds: playwrights into plays, tragedians into comedy, men into lingerie. But with the In-Law's entry to the Thesmophoria, and the entry of the chorus that marks the onset of the main action, the whole setting of the play opens up into a fantastic universe of topsy-turvy. The essence of this world is that men's affairs notably, the proceedings of the Athenian assembly – are parodied by women, all the while the satyric In-Law's preposterous disguise travesties femininity itself. But the artistic themes of the prologue are not lost sight of either, as the great debate on Euripides broadens out to make mischief with broader ideas about the links between life and art.

The women's complaint is not, after all, that Euripides has spread lies about womankind. Quite the reverse: he has published the unvarnished truth about Aristophanic woman's uninhibited lifestyle of drink, casual adultery, larder binges, infant substitution, and systematic conspiracy against their husbands, and now the menfolk are wise to all their traditional tricks. The In-Law's only argument for clemency, in an outrageous speech of escalating absurdity, is that even Euripides hasn't told the half of it:

MNESILOCHUS: *... He never let on about the woman who did her old man in with an axe; or the one who gave her husband a drug that sent him mad; or the woman from Acharnae who buried her father under the hot-water tank in the kitchen.*

FIRST WOMAN: *Shame on you!*

MNESILOCHUS: *Ha ha, and he never let on about you, did he? How you had a girl and your maid had a boy, and you changed them round and passed the boy off as yours?*

So far, the only threat posed by the plot is the women's proposed revenge against Euripides. But with the In-Law's exposure and capture a new and perilous twist emerges, as the comic hero finds himself to his horror a prisoner of the looking-glass world of the Thesmophoria. Ironically, it is now Euripides himself who must infiltrate this feminist Toontown, to deliver his own failed deliverer. As carefully explained in the prologue, he cannot disguise himself as a woman; but he can perhaps insinuate himself in a different way, by camouflaging the very boundaries between reality and fiction. Euripides is the theatrical master of flamboyant rescue plots in exotic settings; all he has to do is to turn this real-life rescue into a scene from one of his plays.

And so, in the play's increasingly surreal second half, worlds truly collide. The In-Law playing Andromeda to Euripides' Perseus (in a parody of the lost tragedy *Andromeda*) is simultaneously a man playing a woman, a comedian playing tragedy, and a real prisoner playing a fictitious one. Unfortunately, the one-man audience to all these performances, an imbecilic barbarian guard, is terminally literal-minded. Like the woman guard in the earlier *Helen*-scene, the Scythian is too firmly rooted in his own slow-witted reality to be taken in by the dazzling worldplay around him. Even when he is scripted into the play-within-a-play by the improvisations of others, he sees only a grubby old prisoner in drag soliciting strangely to an elderly gentleman:

EURIPIDES: *Come, Scythian, help me up! For men are prone to every kind of ill, and in my case love for this maid hath smit me at first sight.*

SCYTHIAN: *Then you got-a da verra peculiar taste. If he was tied up da oder way round, yes, den I undertand.*

EURIPIDES: *O Scythian, let me but her bonds untie, and I will hear her to the bridal bed.*

SCYTHIAN: *You want-a verra much make-a love to da ol' gentleman, you gotta go round-a da backside, yes. Bore-a da hole through da wood, ha ha! . . .*

EURIPIDES: *Alas, what can I do? What can I say?
He doesn't understand, his barbarous mind
Is much too dim to waste my wisdom on.
I'll have to think of something less abstruse.*

The spiralling fantasy and intellectual frolics that characterise the new wave in tragedy have at last met their brick-wall nemesis, in a spectator fatally devoid of imagination itself. But by a final twist of apt irony, the Scythian's very earthiness offers an escape route if only normality can be re-established. When Euripides at last agrees to abandon his whistle-blowing treatment of womankind in his plays, he is striking a deal to restore the familiar barriers between male and female, comedy and tragedy, fantasy and life. Only then, in a final decisive return to masculine comic fantasy, is the guard diverted, by an all-too-physical cabaret girl; while the In-Law escapes at last to the world outside – a strangely reassuring world where, after all, life is not theatre, women are not men, and only a delinquent handful of men are women.

(All quotations are from David Barrett's translation in Aristophanes: The Frogs and Other Plays (Penguin, 1964).)

Nick Lowe is a Lecturer in Classics at Westfield College, London, and Coordinator of the 1989 London Festival of Greek Drama, at which a new production of Thesmophoriazousai will be presented.

For more information about the festival see the notice on page 14 of this number of Omnibus.